

Climate change, severe weather affecting food prices and availability 2012 August 19 By [Scott Sutherland](#) | [Daily Brew](#)

A severe drought in the U.S. this summer has food prices on the rise, with prices expected to increase as much as 4 per cent next year, according to [a recent projection by CIBC](#). While that's only half the increase caused by the 2008 food crisis, it's double the national average. And with Canada only recently [climbing out of a recession](#), the increase is particularly bad timing for lower-income families.

Food security experts currently working on the U.N.'s Fifth Assessment Report of the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) are warning of impacts beyond the U.S. drought, though.

"It has not been properly recognized yet that we are dealing with a food system here. There is a whole chain that is also going to be affected by climate change," said Dr. John Porter, a Professor of Agricultural Systems Ecology at the University of Copenhagen.

If severe weather such as droughts and flooding become more widespread due to climate change, the biggest worry won't be a shortage of food.

"It's a distributional problem - there is enough food in the world. But the distribution doesn't work," said Bruce McCarl, an Agricultural Economics professor at Texas A&M University. This means that if food becomes scarce in a region due to drought or flooding, food from other regions could fill the gap, but getting the food there would be the problem.

It wouldn't be hard for Canada to receive support from the United States and Mexico in the event of a food shortage here, since there are several lines of transportation between the three countries. However, North American weather and climate is closely connected, so more frequent droughts and flooding could impact agriculture across the continent. This would force us to rely on overseas sources for aid, which would greatly reduce the amount of available food and drive the prices of what is available through the roof.

Developing drought-resistant or flood-resistant crops will certainly help, as well as technological advances with higher yields or better grain storage. However, we can't count on those kinds of advances indefinitely.

"We may be hitting a point where it's getting harder to get technological progress", McCarl said. Rates of yield increase have been on the decline since the '70s.

Even with a global population now in excess of 7 billion, population growth hasn't exceeded food production yet. However, as Porter points out, food production currently has three mouths to feed: people, biofuels and animals. "In my view we can have two out of those three and not all three," he said.

His suggestion: Switch to a more vegetarian diet.